KATE HOLDEN

'Holden weaves a quintessential Australian story.'
CHLOE HOOPER

'A gripping account of our land and ourselves.'
TARA JUNE WINCH

SAMPLE TEXT

THE WINTER ROAD

A STORY OF LEGACY, LAND AND A KILLING AT CROPPA CREEK

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine', and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: 'Beware of listening to this imposter; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.'

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 1754

We could say well that the settlement of these plains saw a tragedy which arose from both sides being true to their natures.

—R.J. Webb, *The Rising Sun: A History of Moree and District 1862–1962*, 1962

Why did the man cut down the tree? Because it was there.
Why didn't the man cut down the tree? Because it wasn't there.

— Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton,
***The Treehouse Joke Book*, 2019**

PROLOGUE

The crunch of the ute's tyres down the road. The sound of his breathing. His heart: he thought it would kill him. And his mouth was that dry.

He had hoped the dark would hasten, for cover. He had been watching it coming: the dusk soaking down the trees, the shadows dissolving. They might make it, if only the winter dark could arrive. Robert Strange had heard the fear in Glen Turner's voice, there in the shadows, crouched behind the ute. But he had also feared the dark because as it rose to hide them, Turnbull's gun would begin to hurry.

They were on Talga Lane, a broad dirt groove in the farming country heading east–west in the flat lands between Moree and Croppa Creek, in northwest New South Wales. The road went straight to the horizon. Lined with scrub on either side, and to the left and right, occasional properties, palisades of vegetation, and enormous quilts of cleared, cropped land.

It was just before six o'clock. Knock-off time, nearly tea time. The road had been empty for the last forty minutes. Just Strange and Turner and Ian Turnbull, the two white utes, the brigalow scrub, the koalas and other little animals keeping quiet, the cloudless sky slowly lifting into the night.

Then the raised gun. The quiet, urgent voices. The shots. The pleas.

Now Turnbull's rasping voice was gone and Turner's panicked breath was gone and Strange could stop talking, stop this mad monologue to Turnbull holding the .22, saying we're unarmed, we're not here to hurt you, sir, please put the gun down, and to Turner, stay down, Glen, move up a little bit, Glen, move up, move, move, he's coming; his mouth so dry he could barely get the words out and he needed to keep talking.

There had been six explosions from the mouth of the gun.

In the silence afterwards, Turnbull's red tail-lights had grown small. The dark came down like a door, only a little light in the sky to the west.

The tall scrub, the black grass, the man now lying on the earth with his head towards the trees. Such hush.

Strange got in their ute and turned on the engine, trundling off the road to shine the headlights on the fallen man. He kneeled down next to Turner, who was still breathing, faintly. He got some water out of the car, took a mouthful and poured some over Turner. He talked to him. He said they were both going to be okay.

Weak pulse. He rubbed Turner's head. He poured more water over the man's face. The water glistened in the white light.

Turner, trees above him, earth beneath, receiving his blood. Strange, holding Turner. The men were bathed in a channel of light that bled across the rough grass. Behind, the scrub. Behind the scrub, the fields and the huge sky.

Strange heard a vehicle approaching. He thought, He's coming back. I've got no service and he's coming back. Hang in there, hang in there, Glen.

He let go of Turner. He ran out onto the road. If it wasn't help, he didn't want to see what was going to happen. In the winter dark, on the winter road, he closed his eyes.

The car slowed, a solid young man behind the wheel staring at him. The man stopped, backed up. Strange said his colleague had been shot. Andrew Uebergang rang triple zero on his phone. He said to Strange, *You have to talk, I can't talk*, handed the phone over with a shaking hand. Strange got into Uebergang's white ute to explain and give directions.

Far away in Dubbo, Strange and Turner's boss at the Office of Environment and Heritage, Arthur Snook, was getting a call that Turner's Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) had been activated. He tried Turner's phone. He tried Strange's. Tried again.

Strange's phone came to life. 'Arthur, is that you? Arthur, Glen's been shot, chase the ambulance, he's bleeding badly.'

'Where are you?' Snook shouted down the line.

'Talga Lane, Talga Lane.'

The call dropped out.

The ute driver said he'd go for help. His white lights swung away. Strange went back out to Turner. He pulled him to a sitting position, cradling his

head. Blood came out of Turner's mouth, shining in the cold light of the headlights. He wasn't breathing.

Strange dropped him. Pressed his big hands against Turner's chest. Pumped. Pumped. 'Come on, Glen. Come on, Glen, you can't do this. We've got to get home.'

And he realised Glen was dead.

PART ONE

TRESPASS

1

The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes.

— Barry López, *Crossing Open Ground*, 1988

His name is Ian Robert Turnbull. A classic man of the district: iron-grey hair, barrel chest with great gripping arms, creaky legs from years on a tractor. A check shirt under a woollen jumper. Big tough hands of a farmer, the skin on the back of his neck creased by weather.

He's patriarch of the clan, with four sons and fifteen grandchildren. Been married to Robeena, Rob, for fifty-five years. He's been a big man of the little town, given money when locals needed a hand, but kept out of the papers – nothing exhibitionist, nothing showy. Mates with everyone important, and the best lawyers. Began with one farm, and now look at him. Not afraid to think big, to think of his family to come. He's travelled with the Australian Wheat Board, went to the United States twenty years back: much impressed by the large-scale farms there, the respect for the landholder, the rights of property owners, who aren't told how to run things.

His health as a child had been bad, with four bouts of rheumatic fever, inflaming the heart and its valves. But it didn't stop him. He was the cheeky jackdaw in a kindergarten play. Won 'best individual boy' at primary school, snapped in a proud soldier's uniform.

His dad farmed a bit, around Inverell and Moree, but Ian grew up to work with wood. He was a carpenter and joiner, not a farmer. Then his chance arrived: a property came up for sale. 'Yambin' was on the slope above Croppa Moree Road, the slice of bitumen that linked the hamlet of Croppa

Creek to the town of Moree. Later he bought little 'North Yambin', across the road from it. He got 'Lima' from Rob's dad, along with 'Buckie'; then 'Wallam', 'Allendale', 'Erralee', 'Elgin'. And now 'Strathdoon' and 'Lochiel', next to each other on County Boundary Road. One of them is for his son Grant, and Grant's a smart cookie; he'll turn it to profit, like his other holdings. He's already renamed 'Lochiel' to 'Colorado', stamping his mark. Turnbull helped Grant get started and now it's grandson Cory's turn, got him set up now too on the other block, used his own mortgage as a guarantee. He has four sons, though Doug and Sam don't farm, and Roger – best not to talk about him. But Roger's lad Cory is sound. So those two properties, they're not really his, as such, just he has an arrangement with the boys.

Between them, the Turnbulls have nearly 9000 acres of the best agricultural land in the country – the black soil of the Golden Triangle goes for thousands of dollars the hectare now. And to think it was all under scrub once. He might be seventy-nine and getting tired, but he's going to see his family right before he goes.

It's all big wide monoculture fields around here. Mostly wheat and barley, but some chickpeas too. You can do anything in this soil; the country's biggest pecan farm isn't far, and there's cotton to the west. Though Moree runs on artesian bore water, out this way, an hour east, there's usually enough rain.

A nice little place, Croppa: pretty creeks, and hills here and there. Only a few dozen people in the town itself, but more out on the properties, and it's got the tennis and golf clubs, the little school, the general store. Australian flags on top of the cabs. Lawrence Tibbins' collection of old farm machinery lined up right around a block. Now and then he gets them going – the kids help fix them up, and they even take the creaky old harvesters out into the fields to have a go. Turnbull is known for his quiet generosity – sending a heap of seed to a new farmer, lending his best dog to a muster, paying for a neighbour's gravel and putting in to build the local nursing home; city kids screaming with delight on his tractor, clutching a special sample of sheared wool. Croppa Creek is less than a hundred years old but it's doing better than a lot of little towns, and that's thanks to the farms, the money brought in, the hard work people have done on the land for decades. The fields reach to the horizon – big, smooth blankets of gold. There's a bit of scrub left on the fencelines and boundaries, of course, it keeps the wind off

these basalt plains. But look at the place. It's earning its living, and that's thanks to people like him.

The old Scott brothers owned 'Strathdoon' and 'Lochiel', just on the other side of the road from 'Buckie' and 'Lima', their whole lives. The blocks have been let go, half grown over with scrub since they were cleared a bit and grazed on back in the day. It was all grazing for a hundred years round here; then when Turnbull was young the scientists told everyone to plough and sow, and it was crops, crops, crops, while the Scotts' blocks just sat there. Good soil waiting. Now, if he can get rid of the bloody scrub and get a tractor through with the seeds, those blocks will do well.

'If you pull up on County Boundary Road to the southern side of the property, you'll hear the dozer,' a man's voice told him. Glen Turner knew what this meant. By the day of that phone call in June 2012, the compliance officer already had six months' worth of files on the Turnbulls. His department, the Environmental Protection Agency, had written a letter advising the old man before he'd even bought 'Strathdoon' half a year before that he couldn't clear without permission: 'While the EPA fully expects that you will comply with legislative requirements, our aim is to ensure that you are fully aware of your responsibilities …' They'd been warned he'd try. But the block was covered in native vegetation, and everyone knew it was probably protected by law.

Turner had actually been out that way a fortnight earlier, inspecting another property near Croppa Creek. He'd seen a new crop planted on 'Strathdoon' and taken photos. After what he'd seen in February, March and April, it wasn't really a surprise. The person who called in June had been in touch before, and he seemed reliable. Turner was busy, but he rang Ian Turnbull the next morning. If the dozers were running the previous day, they'd probably still be going.

'Have you got some pimp out here reporting on us?' asked Turnbull sharply. He had observed keenly how his neighbours had been treated by the regulators in the past. Small communities: not everyone respects the local ways.

Turner told him about the anonymous tipster. Turnbull digested this. 'You can come out,' he said, 'but I need forty-eight hours' notice.' As a

compliance officer, Turner was used to this response. A lot could be cleared away in two days.

Two days later, Turner headed out on the three-hour drive, picking up the quietly spoken ecologist Chris Nadolny to take along with him. The two had been on this case together from the start. On the roadside boundary the Turnbulls had left ten or so metres of fenceline vegetation as required, but the visitors could see immediately that more clearing had been done on 'Strathdoon' – all along the boundary with 'Colorado' and further into the property.

County Boundary Road is unsealed, a pale tan ribbon grooved between wide grass verges and fences fringed with remnant scrub: brigalow, belah, box trees, smaller shrubs. The tree boughs arc towards the road, and the shaggy dark greenery is thick, but in places only a few metres deep. Native flowering shrubs wander towards the bitumen, and there are crags of prickly pear bedded in among the bush. Beyond are low fences.

The entrance to 'Strathdoon' has a short driveway, then a double metal gate. The white four-wheel drive pulled in alongside the one already waiting. A tall, grey-haired man was standing by it. Turner and Nadolny got out and, not for the first time, the three men shook hands. Turner commented drily on the new work.

'We've cleared,' said Turnbull, meeting his gaze, 'because this is prime agricultural country.'

He acted as if he didn't understand the problem. This was one of the last blocks still covered in scrub around here, he said. Though it was poor grazing country and had been eaten out by sheep, the soil was good under all that mess. It had had sixty or seventy years of brigalow on it, fixing nitrogen into the soil; in other parts of the country, you had to put the nitrogen in. It had just been let go. 'Colorado' next door had never even been rung – that is, the bark removed in a ring so that the trees died. Turner and Nadolny, gazing around, saw what they knew were remnant populations of protected species. But what Turnbull saw was, he explained with satisfaction, the last of the black soil.

Croppa Creek, less than an hour from Boggabilla on the border between New South Wales and Queensland, is a speck of human habitation in a sea of vegetation. That vegetation used to be the grassy woodlands of brigalow and box and native grasses kept open by the Murri people of the Kamilaroi. Flinders, Kangaroo and perennials, which look dead in drought but revive after rain, flourished here. Edible herbs once grew between the clumps too.

There are small hills and ranges to the east, and beyond them the mountains are visible, where Tenterfield, Glen Innes and other towns of New England brim the foothills of the Divide; further still is the coast where Glen Turner grew up, in Telegraph Point, among the warm coastal forests. Tamworth is hours to the southeast over tumbling hills; Narrabri and Gunnedah on the plains south are distant, too. There are little townships and localities sprinkled around, often based on former stations. On road maps the highways are scant red lines loosely strung across spaces, hours of driving between them.

Croppa Creek and nearby small towns Warialda and Pallamallawa form a triangle on basaltic soil between the Gwydir and Macintyre rivers, which run roughly east–west before curling around to the south; Croppa Creek itself cuts diagonally across, meeting up with sister creeks in a skein of precious wet in the mostly flat expanse west of the Divide. To the southwest of Croppa is Moree, a town of over 7000 people; Warialda, once the district centre but now much shrunken, lies to the southeast.

This is country just sufficiently close from the arid inland, just soaked enough with rain, just mineral-rich enough from millions of years of basalt ground to powder, that from the moment an escaped convict reported its riches, men were drawn here to make wealth.

It is good grazing land, because the self-mulching soils can't be easily destroyed by hooves. Cattle grew fat and happy here. But grains and cotton make more money. Now it's one of the most intensively farmed, broadacre-cropped, wealth-producing areas of the continent. It's one of the most transformed landscapes of the nation, and its colour is no longer khaki green but gleaming gold.

In *A Million Wild Acres*, his landmark book about the history and ecology of the adjacent Pilliga region, historian and farmer Eric Rolls describes

the country beautifully: 'The plains are like flat, black ocean. In the marvellous mirages of hot summers, they often look like true ocean, a surging blue which indistinctly joins the sky. There is nothing else to be seen. Even the trees are drowned in blue light.' This is a land of thin waving stems, of brushed silken fields smooth as Persian carpet. The thin strips of travelling stock routes, still shaded by eucalypts, box, belah and acacia, seem eccentrically messy in comparison. But that scrub is the last of a type of dry rainforest millennia old.

Moree is wealthy, not just a rural hub but a destination, home to artesian baths and a multimillion-dollar aquatic centre. Eastern European migrants incongruously pilgrimage here annually to take the waters. It is also a town of stock agents and silos: the sight that greets those who arrive by road is yards of gleaming new John Deere tractors, ranged by the dozen with their shining green snouts, announcing Moree's practice and its pride. The Moree Plains Shire produces a yearly average of a million tonnes of wheat, worth about $180 million, and many of the wealthy families of the district consider themselves patrician, the makers of the country. Even the footpaths of the town are silky granite. In rain they become slippery. It doesn't rain that much in Moree anymore, however.

The Moree Tourism website puts it sweetly: 'At different times of the year, the wide plains of the Moree district are a natural tapestry as the beautiful differing colours of the bounteous crops flood the land.' One commodity the shire has in abundance is sunshine. About ten kilometres out of Moree, a company called Fotowatio Renewable Ventures runs one of the largest photovoltaic solar plants in Australia. The plains are changing in more ways than one.

But in the summer of 2016–17 Moree had a heatwave that broke all records. It equalled its hottest day ever recorded: 47.3 degrees. And it had fifty-four straight days from December to February in which the temperature rose over 35 degrees. The previous record, back in 1912, was twenty-one days.

There is no shade and less rain because the trees are gone. Once, there were grassy woodlands. Then there was a broad clot of scrub, thick with koalas, wild pigs and prickly pear. That has been vigorously cleared in the past fifty years. Now the land is naked.

Just a few hours' drive southwest from Moree is Cuddie Springs, where stone tools place First Nations peoples there between 30,000 and 40,000 years ago. The original inhabitants of what would later be Moree Plains Shire had thousands of years of experience in that landscape. They saw it dry and moisten. They probably witnessed megafauna grazing on its plains, stepping through the forests. They walked every centimetre of that land. They knew it; they changed it.

The Aboriginal peoples in the northern part of the district are Bigumbul/Kamilaroi, and to the south, Weraerai. The area is strewn with what's left of their traditional meeting and sacred sites: a grand bora circle at Terry Hie Hie, more at Northcote, Boobera Lagoon, Berrigal Creek and others. And in Boobera Lagoon, the Rainbow Serpent, Garriya itself, is believed to rest.

Most of the people of the plains were 'disposed of in one determined engagement', according to Eric Rolls, when a massed group of warriors challenged the stockmen on a property near Borambil, an hour south of what is now Tamworth, in 1827 or 1828; almost all of the young men died on one day. Those who weren't killed in frontier violence were captured and put on missions, and their descendants have shared scantily in the wealth of the country since.

In the course of millennia, the land consumed the traces of those humans who first stepped so lightly on its surface. That self-mulching soil, says a heritage survey report, has devoured their footprints. What was left has been scraped away by demolition, neglect, ploughing and laser levelling for irrigation. The bora trees were knocked down, sometimes unknowingly, sometimes not.

The old Scott brothers' ancestor came out, like many other Celts, in the 1840s, and settled near Moree in the 1870s. The family took up land, stocked it with 100,000 sheep and built a large homestead. They poisoned dingos, felled trees, dug dams, put in wells and fences. The history books don't mention what happened to the local Kamilaroi. The property shrank, but two small blocks survived in their hands until 2011: 'Strathdoon' and 'Lochiel'.

Ian Turnbull was born in Moree in November 1934. It was the year of a grasshopper plague so bad the insects ate the clothes off the washing line, the blinds off the windows; they shaded the very sun, so the trains halted

on the track. Dust storms came booming over from the inland, bringing smothering gloom and clogging vehicle engines, stripping the landscape to the west and obscuring this one. They were caused by erosion, due to farming and pests, such as rabbits and grasshoppers. The legacy of pastoral experimentation was already flailing.

This was the Depression era, when men would come by looking for work and a feed, tearing cooked meat off the bone like dogs. The week Turnbull was born, there was a storm on the Thursday night and heavy black clouds on Friday morning. Those grasshoppers were soon to hatch and, with the oppressive weather and farmers under strain, buyers had to sign a pledge that poison would be applied only to the insects and not used for murder. There were warnings for anthrax, galvanised burr. On 'Strathdoon', the Scott brothers' father was penalised for not killing enough rabbits. A compliance officer came to inspect the block and fined its owner for running an environmental hazard: anyone who owned Australian land was expected to kill wildlife, put up fences and ringbark trees. You were letting the community down if you did not, and the law would make sure you knew it.

Mostly settlers just grazed the country, letting the cattle roam wild in the scrub and pear, bashing it back where they could for roads, settlements and, later, fences, but unable to clear it. This was until ball-and-chain clearing and the cactoblastis moth came along. 'The way was now open for the development of the famous Pallamallawa wheat belt,' a Croppa Creek town history states proudly. 'Development has been most spectacular.'

Long-time resident Robeena Turnbull contributed to that history. 'My happy childhood was spent at "Lima",' she wrote. 'When Dad bought the property in 1931, he camped in the woolshed until the house was built.' Croppa Creek barely existed when Robeena was born. It formed within what was once a run called Bogamildi, which at its prime covered over 220,000 acres, right on the richest little wedge of agricultural country on the continent, the heart of the black-soil plains.

It was a world marked by distances. Local church services were held under a tree, the minister doing the rounds on a buggy. A man called Jacob Haddad came around once a month in a truck stocked with hosiery, boots, sewing supplies and fabric. Kids, a working part of the farming life, were sent off after school to infect prickly pear with cactoblastis moth larvae and

chase wild pigs through the scrub on horseback. Landowners grew wealthy on vast properties, farmers struggled on small plots, and bitter power wars between nineteenth-century squattocracy and selectors continued to play out even as a gravel road was put in and Moree built a fine art-deco cinema for the first talkies. By the 1940s Croppa had houses and a railway line. Drays carted wool to town in handsewn bags that were stocked in great towers. But works on the line were lit by slush lamp – a dish of tallow with a string, as basic and rustic as in the 1790s.

'The phone was connected in 1952,' Robeena recalled. It was only a line with twelve parties; anyone could pick up a receiver and listen in. 'We drove into Moree every six weeks for groceries and business which was an all-day affair. My brother Ran and I, being the eldest, used to sit in the back of the 30 cwt. Oldsmobile truck rugged up in blankets.' The winter roads would stick any cart to a stop. For weeks it was impossible to get supplies from Moree. It might have been any time in the previous century. 'Often a storm had been across the road while we had been in town and we would end up bogged, mostly on the road near the place "Yambin".' She could not know then that the property would one day be her home with Turnbull, the scene of his midnight arrest, police in the garden alert for resistance, headlights trained on the front door.

In the mid-1950s Ran, then in his twenties, began to farm 'Leyland', in the Gwydir Shire near the village of North Star, with support from his father, Les. Ran got help to build a wool shed from a trainee carpenter, Ian Turnbull. The two young men built the shed, and a cottage next door. They got on well. Turnbull – who had a little block himself, out near Inverell – married Robeena a few years later. Ran, content to live and work on 'Leyland', began to love his small patch of land. He studied it deeply and understood it to be a gift from God, to be managed in a responsible, nurturing way to the best of his ability. But Turnbull, with his father-in-law's encouragement and a bit of his money, began to buy, clear and sell land.

'Now in 1987,' Robeena wrote comfortably in the local history, 'Ian and I have been married for twenty-eight years, during which time we have raised four sons, Douglas, Roger, Grant and Sam. We have two daughters-in-law and two grandsons, Cory and Nathan.' More descendants would yet be born.

Steadily moving through the decades, Croppa Creek has remained a small, close world. Its proud little primary school still has only a handful of students. The silos, gleaming beacons, rise above the town; inside lie the billions of grains of the people's prosperity. This is *l'Australie profonde*, its mythic colours of gold and green, its timeless ways, its small gods. It was country destined for wheat from the first hopes and plans of the colony, but the endless burnished plains of the Golden Triangle have been a while in the making.

The wealth of the Moree plains links, unexpectedly, to the musings of white-wigged political philosophers hundreds of years earlier, and their considerations on property ownership and the land. Distant and abstruse though they seem, the ideas of these European and American men directly inform modern Australia, are sensed deeply in its rural communities and were present at the gate of 'Strathdoon' when Ian Turnbull explained to Glen Turner and Chris Nadolny why he had to develop his property. They contour the motivations for this tragedy: why a man like Turnbull could feel such a grip of ownership on land he has fashioned and profited from, whose boundaries he's marked and title he holds, and how a government compliance officer like Glen Turner is charged with reminding him of the responsibilities of that creed.

English philosopher John Locke, writing in the 1690s, was a defining character in this paradigm. Earlier thinkers had posited that God bestowed country; occupation of land implied property, albeit contingent on divine will. Locke adjusted this concept: it was the application of action that conferred a moral right of property. His *Two Treatises of Government* proposed a logic of ownership which begins with the principle that each man (it was always men) owns his own body and his body's labour. Nature is a 'negative commons', a world that exists for all, and when the person applies his labour, the ground on which he does so becomes his.

Unowned land, or *terra nullius*, as it became known, was a 'land of an equal richness lying waste in common'. And if land was virtually unlimited – as seemed the case with the endlessly extending Americas of Locke's day – what could be the injustice in using, and so claiming, it? 'Nobody could think himself injured,' Locke wrote, 'by the drinking of another man, though

he took a good draught, who had a whole river of the same water left him to quench his thirst. And the case of land and water, where there is enough of both, is perfectly the same.'

A century later, and only six years after the First Fleet 'discovered' another apparently endless continent, American revolutionary philosopher Thomas Paine riposted that property ownership was in effect theft: it deprived the many of their natural inheritance of God's bounty. '[T]he earth, in its natural, uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, the common property of the human race,' he wrote, presaging the concept of shared human stewardship. 'Cultivation is at least one of the greatest natural improvements ever made,' he agreed, but he insisted only the improvement itself and its profits, not ever the land, could belong to an individual. By taking both profit and property, the landed, entitled gentry had inflicted 'a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before'.

The only redress, Paine insisted, was a property tax, which would redistribute some of the unjustly coveted benefits gained from appropriating the commons. 'I care not how affluent some may be,' he explained, 'provided that none be miserable in consequence of it.'

In the years between Locke and Paine, Genevan thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau had also proposed a communal concept of property. A civil society, Rousseau thought, existed to protect property rights but curb excessive private property ownership, and to support a shared commons. In *The Social Contract* (1762), he wrote of a fundamental compact between a man and his society. The right of an individual 'is always subordinate to the right which the community has over all'. Any natural right to own property was on the condition of taking part in civil society, not using it to abuse privilege.

The differences between Locke's concept of ownership and that of Rousseau and Paine are crucial. The first invites an understanding of land as an opportunity for seizure and personal advantage. Today we see Lockean ideas in neoliberalism. The strongest, the first, the most vigorous or powerful take the spoils. Once seized, it is theirs. Anyone who wants something of it will have to pay. Rousseau and Paine agree with Locke that action – the labour involved in improvement of land – is fundamental to the legitimate ownership of property. But land *is* finite, so possession by one entails denial to another. The landholder only profits from cultivation – any

farmer, for example, is the owner of his products but not of the earth that made them. If an occupier takes too much from the land, he must compensate the people. This is a horizontal perspective, looking outwards to fellow humans, aware of our shared interests, respectful of our temporary presence on the planet. Action is taken and improvements are made with consideration of their cost. In place of the Lockean pyramid whose summit becomes a fortification, there may be – there was – a village.

The Enlightenment took inspiration from both Locke and Rousseau, but Locke's formulas were immensely influential in shaping the Western view of nature. By the time of Australia's settling, the ineluctable mark of a British citizen was land ownership. It enfranchised him, gave him rights, offered access to authority: he could complain, have restitution, be compensated. Suffrage was only granted to British men with some kind of property entitlement. This excluded about 60 per cent of them, both natives in the old world and free white men in the new.

Land – elemental, foundational – was the desperately prized asset in a new colony. Without it, a man was only an object.

So imagine the feelings of modest people, rural or urban, unskilled or former farmers, who a generation before might have shared pasture but had, since the devastating Clearances in Scotland and the Enclosures of the commons in England over the previous century, been evicted from even that small subsistence. Or those who had never even seen a field or a forest, and were told of boundless land for the taking: thirty, forty, fifty acres, apparently empty of competition, ripe for God's work of improvement. It must have seemed breathtaking. Families could feed themselves. Clans would restore, dynasties be nourished. A man might make a name for himself. He could pass something on to his children, and he could mind his own affairs.

Two hundred years later, it is likely that Ian Turnbull, looking to cultivate the last of the black soil on the Scott brothers' old blocks, felt much the same way.

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July 2014, a lonely road at twilight outside Croppa Creek, New South Wales: 80-year-old farmer Ian Turnbull takes out a .22 and shoots environmental officer Glen Turner in the back.

On one side, a farmer hoping to secure his family's wealth on the richest agricultural soil in the country. On the other, his obsession: the government man trying to apply environmental laws.

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Kate Holden is the author of two highly praised memoirs, *In My Skin* and *The Romantic*, and a regular contributor to *The Saturday Paper*, *The Monthly* and *The Age*.

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